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CITATION:

PHU, Ba Trung. Bani Islam Cham in Vietnam. CIAS discussion paper No.3 : Islam at the Margins: The Muslims of Indochina 2008, 3: 24-33

ISSUE DATE:

2008-03

URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2433/228403>

RIGHT:

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# Bani Islam Cham in Vietnam

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## Abstract

The Chams are an ancient ethnic group which inhabits several countries in Southeast Asia today. In Vietnam, the Chams are given official recognition as one of the 54 ethnic groups that make up the country. Numerically, the Chams number over 131,000 people and historically they once had their own kingdom and illustrious civilization in Champa which overlaps with central Vietnam today. The Chams in Vietnam may be divided into three categories, namely, the Brahmanized or Hinduized Chams, the Bani Islam Chams and the Chams who follow orthodox Islam. Although these three groups of Chams have plenty of differences between them it is their ethnic identity as Cham that unites them as a people. In view of the uniqueness of their culture and history, there have been many attempts to study them from many different approaches. This paper attempts to examine the role of the Bani Islam Chams in Vietnam from the sociological perspective. Their heterodox version of indigenized Islam is very different from the orthodox Islam observed by their ethnic brethren in Southwest Vietnam as they are also distinctive from the Brahmanized or Hinduized Chams. Using appropriate illustrations, the paper tries to show that the unique and colourful culture and life-style of the Bani Islam Chams continues to be relevant today as they have been from ancient times.

## Rationale

Religion is a social phenomenon which impacts on two sides of life, namely the community and the individual. Religion has existed from the dawn of civilization up till this present time. Religion plays a pivotal role in helping fulfill the spiritual need of believers. Religion does not only consist of rites and rituals but also encompasses social affairs. It is able to relate to the perceived world of the afterlife (heaven and hell) as well as influence the current living world. The activities of religion are closely associated with the life of the community and the nation.

Along with the problems of the present life, religion and religious festivities have always been a major focus of research. The field of sociology is particularly keen on looking at the various issues that the above generates. In Vietnam, the Bani Islam Cham is only a small community. However, with the current global trend of showing a lot of interest in indigenous communities all over the world, it has come to be appreciated as something unique. Interestingly it is this externally-inspired interest that has brought about the rejuvenation of the community.

There are 54 different ethnic minority groups inhabiting Vietnam. These groups have co-existed harmoniously with each other and have kept abreast with the changes of the time. One group that is of particular interest to researchers and the international community, are the Cham people. The Chams are an ethnic group which belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian family who have lived in Central Vietnam for a long time. They have had wide and extensive relations with the continent of Asia and with people from these areas. As an indigenous people who over time gradually became exposed to waves of external influences, the Cham



Map of Vietnam

people have over this long period, created, diversified, reinvented and developed their unique culture to sustain it and make it perennially relevant to the changing times.

Over time, the Cham people have settled in many places. In the process they began to mix with other ethnic groups. The impact of various factors such as the economy, society, environment and geography on the Cham people has been very deep. Today, the Cham communities are represented by three groups divided along religious lines, namely: the Bani Islam Chams, the Brahmanized or Hinduized Chams (Central Vietnam) and the orthodox or mainstream Cham Islam (of South Vietnam).

In Vietnam, the Bani Islam Chams do not ordinarily distinguish themselves from the broader Cham community. Therefore, we need to take note of the basic characteristics of the Cham people as a religious community and the Cham people as an ethnic community. In this sense, the most outstanding trait of the Bani Islam Cham is their unique lifestyle based on their version of Islam which is very different from that of orthodox Islam. This is the subject that I have chosen to address in this paper.

Up to now, most works on the Cham people have tended to ignore the Bani Islam, because they are not well-known. Thus, in this paper we aim to look at them from the sociological angle in order to develop new insights about the problem of the Cham people and the implementation of the law of Islam especially in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces. We hope to also use the scientific contributions of other researchers from other scientific fields in the past in our attempt to examine the role of the Bani Islam Cham in Vietnam.

## Overview of the problem

The Cham people and their cultural religion have been a subject of interest which has been studied for over one century already. For example, the rites, customs, and beliefs of the Chams have been examined in the early XIX century. And up till now, there have been numerous research works on this subject by scholars at home and abroad.

Works of French researchers such as A.Labussiere, Septfonds, A.Landed, and A.Bergaign, easily come to mind. One notable researcher who has made an enormous contribution to the field is E.Aymonier whose work is titled "Les Chams aø Binh Thuaän" (The Cham people in Binh Thuaän; February, 1891). E.Aymonier said that Islam was imported

into Champa in the early X century. Most of the Cham people that adopted Islam refused to be assimilated into Vietnamese society. Hence, they migrated to Cambodia, Siam (Thailand) and Haûi Nam [Hainan in China] island rather than submit themselves to subjugation by the Vietnamese.

In addition, in his works such as “Islamic Cham people and their religion” (April, 1891) he described the religious rites and organizational system of the Bani Islam. He also highlighted the life cycle rites of the Chams. However, his research was rather general and fragmented.

On the other hand, to complement more completely the study of the Cham people in Vietnam, the Cham people in Cambodia have been introduced in works such as “The belief and conformability regulations of a religion of Cham people in Cambodia” by E.Aymonier. They all practise orthodox Islam. They give up their ancestor’s heterodox rites and only retained selected customs and attire. According to E.Aymonier, the population of the Cham people in Cambodia was about 10 000 with around 100 villages (paley) and most were well-off, living in crowded villages.

In 1906–1907, Cabaton wrote a series of articles about the Cham people and the Malays in Southern Vietnam; the Cambodian and Cham people in Phan Rang, Phan Rí. In 1941 in a monograph about Islam in Indochina, M. Ner mentioned some basic things about the economy, society, education and religion of the Chams at a Cham village in Chaâu Nôác.

From the 1950s to 1975, many researchers on the Cham people began to emerge in Vietnam such as, Nghieâm Thaâm and Nguyễn Khaéc Ngöô. Works such as Dorohieâm’s “Summary of the history of the Cham”, 1974; Thaùi Vaên Kieâm’s “The influence of Chieâm Thaôn on culture of Vietnam”; and Nguyễn Vaên Luaân’s “Islamic Cham people in the Southwest of Vietnam”, 1974, were produced. The latter is a detailed description of the manners, customs and religious rites of the Cham people in the South.

After 1975, the country has been peaceful. The prevailing conditions favoured more studies on the Chams. Besides, with the growing interest on religious problems in the State, some scholars who had studied the Chams in the past, gradually took on a bigger research project such as Ngoâ Vaên Doanh’s “Champa culture”, 1994; and Maïc Nöông’s “The national problem in the Mekong Delta”.

Recently, a work entitled “Cham culture” was published by Phan Xuaân Bieân, Phan Vaên Doáp and Phan An, in 1991. This was a meticulously researched work on the family, marriage and the religious rites of the Chams. However, this was only a general work and did not thoroughly examine the practice of the Islamic rites of the Islam Cham people.

In addition to the above, there have also been many articles which introduced the religion, rites and the relations between the Islam Cham people and the Viet people in popular magazines as well as papers presented at scientific conferences.

On the whole, up to now, although there has been some progress on the research on the Islam Cham people, the approach adopted by most researchers, hitherto, has been to rely primarily on historical, cultural, and ethnological perspectives. The sociological approach has been almost totally ignored. This paper hopes to fill up the above gap.

## **Methods and technique of study**

### **The general method**

The general method that is used in here, is a qualitative one, combined with descriptive and explanatory notes. The qualitative research helps us understand about the real thoughts and feelings of the Bani Islam Cham believers. Through this method, we should be able to know some of the delicate problems relating to religion and the nation.

The above research method which seeks to describe a fact or state of object in a verifiable way is a very objective approach. This description plays an important role in the analysis of selected phenomena to point out their relationship with the practice of Islamic laws.

Together with the descriptive method above there is also a need to add explanatory notes. The two methods are always in harmony. Further explanations are always necessary to clarify the relationships between an object and a particular phenomenon or several phenomena.

#### **The concrete method**

- a. The methods of data collection and collation from available sources in the works of others which are related or relevant relate to the problem discussed here. Findings of reports, statistical data, and other relevant information which directly related to the problem being studied.
- b. Methods of sampling: Looking for objects which fit the characteristics and demands of the subject being examined, which in this case is the Islam Cham people in Ninh Thuaän, Binh Thuaän.
- c. Methods of analysis and processing of information.

The method of analysing documents: in printed matters in order to extract the necessary and relevant information.

#### **Analysis of traditional documents:**

Besides using the sociological method, the paper also tries to use the historical method especially in trying to trace the historical evolution in Vietnam of both the Bani Islam Cham in particular and the Cham people in general, the background features of their residence, and their activities all viewed within a historical framework.

As observed above there are 54 different ethnic minority groups inhabiting the various parts of Vietnam. These different ethnic minority groups have lived in harmony with one another and managed to preserve their respective ways of life, adjusting and adapting them according to the demands of the of the times. One of the nationalities in Vietnam that has aroused the interest of both foreign as well as local researchers is the Cham people. They are an ethnic group belonging to the Malayo-Polynesian family and who have lived for a very long time in Central Vietnam. They have had extensive relations with many different ethnic groups continental as well as insular Southeast Asia. For example, the Sa Huynh culture which is considered to be the forerunner of Champa culture with relics along the central coastal from Quang Binh to Dong Nai was a flourishing culture. Archaeologists have excavated and found many objects such as- earrings, silver and agate jewelry belonging to that ancient period. In ancient-medieval times there were many ancient architectural and sculptural works which were scattered everywhere in places such as: Amaravati (Quang Binh), Indrapura (Da Nang), Vijaya (Quy Nhon), Kanthara (Nha Trang – Dak Lak), Panturaga (Phan Rang – Dong Nai). The ancient steles, in particular, provide solid evidence of the long history of the Cham people in the region as well as their claim to being indigenous to the area. They had an illustrious civilization which could be easily compared to many other well known civilizations in other parts of Asia and the world. From their indigenous origins, the Cham people have evolved to acquire more complex characteristics due to the continual waves of exogenous influences, emerging in the process as a colourful, diversified and unique culture. This was how the Bani Islam Chams have evolved in Vietnam.

According to official statistics in 1989, the population of the Cham people in Vietnam numbered 131.282. They were primarily influenced by Indian culture and had three differ-

ent religions: Brahmanism or Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Among these the Muslims were divided into two branches namely the Bani Islam Cham and the Chams who practice orthodox Islam. In the case of Buddhism, it only existed amongst the Cham royalty and prospered in Indravarman II 875 A.D. The Bani Islam of the Cham people mainly live in central Vietnam in Ninh Thuan, Binh Thuan (Phan Rang, Phan Rí), while the Cham people of the orthodox Islamic faith are to be found mainly in Southwest of Vietnam in An Giang, Ho Chi Minh city, Long Khanh, Binh Phuoc. In central Vietnam, two thirds of the Chams are followers of Brahmanism and the remaining one third are the Bani Islam group. In Southwest Vietnam 100 percent of the Chams are Muslims of the orthodox Islamic faith.

Islam was imported into Champa in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Ed Huber said that he found a paragraph in a history book of Sung which explains as follows: "There are also (in Champa) many buffaloes in the mountains but people did not use them to plough. They offered them to a deity". When they kill a buffalo as a sacrifice, they prayed "Alla Akhar". This expression was in order to assert and honour Allah – the only Supreme Being who Muslims must call out in name during prayer.

Aymonier also found that in the historical books of the Cham people, one paragraph was described as follows: "In the Mouse year, one man who has Allah's nature who acted for perfection of the Champa Kingdom, yet people were dissatisfied so he donated his body and mind for God/Allah and lived in Mecca. After that he came back to Champa Kingdom". This account coincided with an archaeological excavation which found two steles in the central coast of Vietnam. One was dated 1039 and the other was from 1025 to 1035. Both of them mentioned Islam but they were foreigners who lived in the central coast of Vietnam. They were businessmen and craftsmen, and lived in groups and had a spiritual leader, who was called an Imaam, who presided over ceremonies.

This stele document proves that the imported Islam had already entered the Champa Kingdom in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Unlike the Bani Islam Cham people, the Cham people in the Southwest of Vietnam observed the orthodox religious laws, lived fully as a community of the faithful. These practices were based on Quranic and Islamic religious laws. This helped them observe their spiritual activities which were centered around the Mosque (Thang Mögik) which was considered as the center for religious and political activity in the village. The Bani Islam Cham people, on the other hand do not depend on Muslim laws. They have an their own religious law and rites which are quite different from the rites of the orthodox Muslims. These include things such as, "Karôh", marriage (Pakhaùh) and funeral (Pathih). They only need their clergy to sustain their version of heterodox Islam. In the Bani Islam concept of Islam the ordinary people could delegate the task of performing religious rites and practices to their clergy or elders and be relieved of their individual religious obligations.

### **The organization of Bani Islam:**

Every family chooses one or two members (a family may choose three) to represent them and carry out the religious activities such as: marriage and funeral rites and etc. The delegated members of the family are called "Acar". Their mission was to recite their version of the Quran to undertake the various religious and to carry out the various religious rites. However, although the Bani Islam clergy (or priests) and/or the delegated members of the family are able to recite Quranic verses, they do not understand the meaning at all. When the delegates become "Acar", they have to obey the religious laws. If they break the laws, they will be punished either seriously or slightly. Normally, they must apologize (Ngha paìh) to Poâ Auloah's (Allah).

This is a complete religious system which includes people such as the following:

- Acar
- Madin – madintan
- Imöm – Imömtan
- Gruø

These people carry out religious laws, first and foremost of which is the weekly communal prayer and other important services.

“Acar” or “Char” is a person who has newly joined the ranks of the clergy. They are required by law to practice and recite the Quran. They are divided to 4 grades: Jamak, Talavi, Poâ sit, Poâ prong.

“Madin” – “Madintan”: is the one who chairs ceremonies and rites, and teaches children the Quran.

“Khotip” or “Tip”: is one who delivers the Friday sermon to the Muslim congregation every week at the mosque. “Tip”’s mission in Bani Islam is to carry out the rites in mosques and private houses, and has no part in explaining doctrines or teachings.

“Imöm” or “Möm”: is a person who is senior and has practised for at least 15 years. He is considered as being knowledgeable on the Bani Islam religion, is able to recite the Quran and perform all religious rites. Among these people is “Möm” – the person understands the Quran and Islamic morals thoroughly. He is chosen to present himself before the forty saints – called Möm Pah (Möm 40). This selection must conform to the strict regulations, particularly of the knowledge of morals and the Quran, and the acceptability of the priest (Poâ Gruø) in that area. Every year there are only one or two days of such an inauguration where the I Möm and Poâ Gruø would come to witness.

Poâ Gruø (The witness): is a person who all the clergy and people in the village vote for. He would lead people in the mosque or hold rites in private houses, and help resolve most problems about religious affairs and social affairs.

In every Mosque (Thang Gik), they choose a group to include Imöm, Din, Tip, Möm that serve for three years. Their task is to communicate the views and decisions of Poâ Gruø or marabouts to the believers.

The Bani Islam of Cham people do not observe the five pillars of Islam which orthodox Muslims must observe such as the declaration of faith to confirm their absolute confidence in Allah and Mohammad as the messenger of God; the five-times of prayers a day and attend the observance of the obligatory Friday prayer in the mosque; the giving of zakat [religious tithes] or [alms] charity; and the need to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime for Muslims who have sufficient means of finance and are in good health to do so. When a Muslim accomplishes his mission to Mecca, they will confer him the title Haji. Almost all the Bani Islam believers do not carry out the above mentioned duties because they believe that religious affairs need only to be carried out by the marabouts (Acar) and these people represent the believers to implement their duty towards Allah. Therefore, in respect of the implementation of their Islamic obligations, every family must have a person who is delegated to represent the whole family in its religious duties and obligations. This person will replace the other members of the family to assume the religious duties with Allah and carry out the practices of their customs such as in marriage and funeral rites and etc in the family. Especially, the title the delegated member of the family is passed from this lifetime to the next. It is clear from the above that the ordinary Bani Islam Cham members do not at all observe the Islamic practices of orthodox Islam. In fact, even the religious leaders of the Bani Islam Cham disregard these practices. Nevertheless, what is interesting for the Bani Islam Cham is that while in the case of the orthodox Muslims the mosque is supposed to be a place where believers pray five times a day and use it as a religious and political center, their mosque only opens on Fridays, in the Ramöran month

(Ramödan) and only during important ceremonies of Islam. The charity which is required of orthodox Islam as one of its principal tenets is changed into an “exchange of rice” by the Bani Islam Chams. The Islamic clergy and members in the family in the Ramöran month give rice in lieu of alms for the marabouts of their family.

### **The fasting month of Ramöwan (Ramadan):**

If one is a Muslim, the month of Ramadan is considered a very special month where the observance of fasting is considered obligatory. This is part of the five main principles of Islam.. The fasting month always makes a very strong appeal to the Muslims. The fasting month starts from when the moon appears in the ninth month of the year in the Muslim calendar to when it occurs again the following month. The Cham people in Southwest of Vietnam have an Islamic calendar which is prepared by Hadji Isahat which takes notes of the holidays which coincide with the solar calendar. They therefore knowing when the fasting month starts and ends. In general, the Ramödan month is regarded as a very important month. To the Cham people in Southwest of Vietnam, all their other activities are usually stopped during the daytime and believers only resume normal life when the sun sets. But for the Bani Islam Cham people who mainly live in Phan Rang (Pa Rang) and Phan Rí (Pa Rik), Ramödan is not considered a fasting month for everyone. It is regarded as a training month for the new religious priests or a month where offerings to the dead for Allah and the Saints of Islam are made. During this month, young priests come to the mosque to conduct various ceremonies. Every family of a new religious leader must offer two sacrificial trays: one meal on a tray and one steamed glutinous rice and sweet soup on another tray or in place of it, a fruit cake. Members of the new religious leader’s family must carry the rice and fruit for him. In the early part of the Ramöwan month, the fifteenth day of the lunar month and the end of fast day, all believers have to bring offerings to the mosque. This includes one meal on a tray and one sweet soup on a tray. The Bani Islam Cham people think that this act demonstrates their sincerity to Allah. The mosque during the month of Ramödan becomes a center of religious activity, particularly at night. Because new religious leaders must enter the mosque to eat vegetarian dishes, their activities take place inside the mosque throughout the Ramöwan month. In addition, the followers of Brahmanism also recognize Allah and pray for Allah’s blessing. This fact is interesting. So, during the month of Ramödan the followers of Brahmanism also carry cakes and bananas to worship and pray in the mosque. This practice is probably the most unique in the world specific only to the Cham people.

According to ancient documents and notables from the previous century to the XXth century, the mosque (Thang Gik) was made of thatch, bamboo walls and ground. In the front of the house is placed seven flat stones for the priests to perform the ablution (washing arms and legs before holding a ceremony). Today, all the mosques of Bani Islam are built with cement, tile roof and bricks. With regard to the architecture, the style of the mosque of the Cham people is different from the mosques in the rest of the Muslim. But what is interesting is that it is still directed towards the West – which is the direction of Mecca. The end side of Mosque – the wall on the west has a corner, called “mimbar” – where priests explain the various doctrines relating to Sunna or Haji. The main religious activities of at the Bani Islam mosques are: the fasting rite during the month of Ramödan and the ceremonies on Friday every week, called “Sut yaâng” or “Zam at”. Therefore the religious rites of the Bani Islam Cham are very different from those of the orthodox Muslims.

Generally speaking, the Bani Islam of the Cham people have existed for a long time. They have always preserved their cultural and religious activities with their unique and specific characteristics. Religious Laws had changed so much to suit the matriarchal society



of the Cham people. The appearance of the priest is specific to the Bani Islam Cham. The above features indicate that a small part of orthodox Islam which was imported into Cham-pa and indigenized into Cham culture, became absorbed into its folk culture, manners and customs. This is probably the principal factor which has made the Bani Islam Cham people in Vietnam different from the other Muslims elsewhere in Southeast Asia and throughout the Muslim world.

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## Pictures of Bani Islam Cham in Vietnam



Getting ready for the Thaonh Ninh Rite (1)



Thaonh Ninh Rite



Women preparing for the Thaonh Ninh Rite



Preparing for the Thaonh Ninh Rite



Preparing for the marriage ceremony



Preparing for the wedding feast



Elderly women at a wedding



Marriage ceremony



Bride and bridegroom



Female worshippers at a mosque



Mosque scene



Praying at Home



Preparing for Khotam [Circumcision]



Bani Islam Cham Funeral



Funeral procession



Prayer ritual at the ancestral graves



Visiting ancestral graves



Paying respect to the ancestral graves



Children at the ancestral graves